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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of
the College of Fine and Applied Arts
in the candidacy of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

PERSISTENCE OF VISION

BY

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I. Introduction

I never thought anything was worth doing unless it was personal. My art is about personal history; it is an ongoing dialogue involving both past and present experiences. For the most part, it is about remembered or dreamed information. It's autobiographical, a visual diary of the events that have shaped my consciousness as an artist. Ever since I can remember, the act of making art helped me to exorcize the furies from within.

Karl Marx once said, "Consciousness is a social product. It reaches up and bites you when you least expect it."¹ I grew up during the cultural shock of the 60's. It was a time for reflection and change. It was during this period that I emerged as an artist. My political voice manifested itself in the early works, and change has conscientiously been a part of my artistic growth. As time passed, my political passion simmered, and my vision was nurtured by other psychic sources surrounding me, mentally helping to create room to draw from my immediate environment.

I am a voyeur. My themes are about observations - innermost and outermost. "I am nature. I work from the

inside out, like nature."² I import my culture, sometimes even rape it for themes and images dealing with life and the struggle for individual survival.

My search is about questions, questions without answers. Or, it is about answers that lead to ask what is fact or fiction? Are my fictions your facts? These questions lead me to ask of myself, who is the real person behind the persona? I chose the persona hiding in the middle. She looked as if she knew all the right answers but I was wrong. I had all the answers, not her. I had the power within me all along. All I had to do was trust my instincts and tap my heels three times.

II. Eyewitness

For someone who has behaved rather seriously, I seem to be on the verge of actually saying something. Maybe I'm just getting around to understanding what the essence of things are all about. My thesis work began when I discovered the essence from within and became aware of my immediate surroundings.

On my farm, I raise horses. I find animals provide me with the emotional balance necessary to cope with the strain of everyday living. They are strong, instinctual and adept at survival, yet they can also be weak and needy of our affections. They are curious yet cunning or stupid depending on a given situation. They are perhaps us, without conditioning. They undoubtedly exhibit examples of all our ways and moods - our emotions unleashed and untrained. I discovered they could be used to illustrate what we try hard not to understand within ourselves. They allow for reflection upon ourselves. Their gestures and body language can be translated in human terms. Through this seemingly routine activity of watching the herd, I discovered endless possibilities for depiction.

Nature can be both threatening and idyllic. It dramatizes an animal's emotions and behavior. Herding animals must adjust according to changing weather conditions, and their survival requires mutual dependency. Even though the horse has been domesticated for centuries, instinct still prevails. They can and do resort to primitive behavior when challenged, threatened, frightened or for other unknown reasons. Their emotions seem personified and they suddenly appear to be mysterious or transformed. I wondered if I subordinated myself to them, might I understand the mysteries that separate me from them?

The act of subordinating felt like a transformation. It's like the "...African shaman wearing the lion's mask, it gives him some feeling for the original symbolic power of the mask. The shaman is convinced he is a lion. This is not a pretense. He shares a psychic identity with the animal. Contemporary western man has cut himself off from such associations, thus depriving himself of a basic link with the natural world. These psychic associations still persist in the unconscious, even though we ignore them."³

Once I began to identify with the natural world, I began a new romance with nature and time.

III. Point of View

Watching the herd became a visual obsession, and I began to see unlimited opportunities for expressing variations of theme. The mood, hierarchy and dynamics of the herding animal reflected constant change. In contrast, their pastoral environment was also affected by changes in climate and these conditions aided an ongoing dialogue between my intellect and imagination. The weather, seasons and time of day created almost surreal effects in the form of dramatic lighting, perspective, distortion of shadow and form. These conditions also created extremes in the animals' moods, and their personalities might swing from quiet tranquility to uncontrollable frenzy. Viewing their private rituals became a real psychic attraction for me, and I felt compelled to watch them at all times. I started to conceive of the pastoral setting as a stage and the animals as characters in a play. This lead me to explore the potential for creating a real stage or narrative setting.

Historically, western art has focused on the horse as a symbol for the erotic or the animal component in men. Often, horse and rider themes depict the speed and power

of the horse within man's body or the power of man over broken beast. In order to exploit the notion of viewer as voyuer and explore the historical, symbolic and hierarchical aspects of the equine species, I intentionally left human figures out of the images. I wanted to free myself from past associations and concentrate more on a universal and/or subconscious level. As a rider myself, I began to gain respect and understanding for the animals when I ceased to interpret their behavior from the view of a mount, thus, over time detaching myself from the need for power and dominance. In effect, freeing myself from old concepts inspired me to visualize on a formal, sensual level as opposed to a historical reference or to past works of art. This is not to suggest that art can only be generated from original ideas, for in every artist's work the degree of originality is minimal. But, rather to imply that what does count is the sensibility and intelligence displayed in realizing an imaginative vision and giving substantial existence to the imitations of the unconscious.

Author Kakuzo Okakura articulates a similar concept. He writes, "We must remember, [however] that art is of value only to the event that it speaks to us. It might be a

universal language if we ourselves were universal in our sympathies. Our finite nature, the power of tradition and conventionality, as well as our hereditary instincts, restrict the scope of our capacity for artistic enjoyment. Our very individuality establishes in one sense a limit to our understanding; and our aesthetic personality seeks its own affinities in the creations of the past. It is true that with cultivation our sense of art appreciation broadens and we become able to enjoy many hitherto unrecognized expressions of beauty. But, after all, we see only our own image in the universe - our particular idiosyncracies dictate the mode of our perceptions. The tea masters collected only objects which fell strictly within the measure of their individual appreciation."⁴

IV. A Visual Pun

I am a scavenger. The thesis sculpture is a result of this habit of mine. The work evolved from years of collecting driftwood along the shores of Lake Ontario and combining it with fence posts used on our farm. I found the blandness of the rigid post forms appealing in contrast to the serpentine nature of the fallen limb forms that are left behind on the shore as a result of erosion.

The process of making forms had to be both simple and direct. In order to compensate my limited skills in woodworking, I decided the best method of approach was drilling and doweling. This enabled me to shape ideas and forms quickly and reminded me of the satisfaction I received as a child when playing with Tinker Toys.

Aside from the obvious intentional use of the fencepost, I developed a personal attachment to using them. As function dictates, the form is utilitarian and the choice of wood humble. Nature plays its part by bleaching and weathering the surface, while on the other hand, the horses sharpen their teeth by chewing and carving textures that neither tools nor human hands could ever duplicate. Conceptually,

I began to appreciate the cyclical nature of the material and its basic lack of preciousness. With this knowledge, I was able to assemble freely, knowing that parts could be added or replaced if broken, or if they simply did not work with the whole of the piece.

In comparison to other learned methods, requiring more accomplished skills, plans, and techniques, this approach worked best for me. Sculptor Keith Sonnier expresses, "I remember reading African myths in which a sculpture was made out of mud for some ritual and then it melted away. To me, that was the best use of art - you just used it to death, it melted and then the culture had to recreate something else. In India, too, the sculpture is altered and repainted to have a totally different look; it has nothing to do with a fixed state. That's the antithesis of iconography in the West. I like sculpture that can be used."⁵

In South African cultures, the horse was revered for its rarity to the region and horsemanship was charged with mysticism. "Mounted figures symbolized Gods and the animals represented an extraordinary group of water spirits. Scholars allege that the horse in Dogon(African tribe) lore is associated with descent from the sky. They further assert

that certain wooden ritual objects, belonging to a society of ritual thieves, represent the head, neck, and mane of a horse. Openwork chevrons which form the mane represent the descent of the arc of creation from the sky. The zig-zag is recognized in West African civilization as marking the line of communication, an avenue binding heaven and earth in the form of lightening." ⁶

The thesis sculpture was ultimately inspired by African myths and sculpture. I felt deeply connected to the powerful expressiveness and use of distortion in form. It provoked me to incorporate fetish symbols, like the zig-zag form in the tail so as to suggest lightening as well as creating a what Marcel Duchamp refers to as a 'visual pun'. Over time, I discovered the linking of narrative with symbol conceptually very appealing.

V. I Spy

"There was no separate label this time with the words DRINK ME but nevertheless she uncorked it and put it to her lips." "I know something interesting is sure to happen," she said to herself, "whenever I eat or drink anything, so I'll just see what this bottle does." ⁷

Printmaking is a revelatory process. It has mystery. It challenges you, forces you to respond and make aesthetic decisions. It opens your eyes, attacks your powers of perception and extends your way of looking at things. It represents a state of being. The process is ongoing, as opposed to stationary. In essence, it embraces you. If there is a moral here, it is for the artist to be conscious and take advantage of the unique properties inherent to the media.

My work begins with a mental image. A mental notion that evolves, giving birth to an idea. It's like a sentence in a story that leads to a narrative that is linked to some concept or event that has been gestating in my mind. The next stage I refer to as "controlled scribbling". In order to investigate an idea, I do exploratory drawings. Like a Rorschach test, I look for images to appear. Later, I might do studies in oil crayon to investigate color, form, and spatial relationships.

In lithography, the stone is alive when you scratch or draw upon it. After that, the process is laborious, tedious and mostly uninspiring. It's only after the first proof is pulled and the image is fresh that you get a thrill. This is a candid assessment by an artist who knows the meaning of patience. Printmaking doesn't happen fast.

As a printmaker, I was attracted to the "manner noire" technique in lithography. It's a subtractive process, similar to scratchboard. When printed, the white lines appear through the black, velvety ground. I begin by rolling black ink on a grained and prepared litho stone. While the ink is still greasy, I begin drawing with etching needles, razor blades and various scraping materials.

In the prints, "Night Watch"[Plate #4] and "Night Moves"[Plate #3], I also incorporate the technique called "Acid Tinting". I use this method to create an atmospheric or ethereal quality. The effect is achieved by adding a small proportion of nitric acid to either gum arabic or water. The solution is applied to the stone with a brush in a painterly way. Depending on the amount of time, it is left on the stone, it eventually 'bites' through the greasy stencil creating cloudlike effects. The etching

process ceases when the acid mixture is sponged off with water. Value or tone varies depending on the length of time the "acid tinting" solution is left on the stone.

In the "Legs"[Plate #6 and #7] series, I editioned a number of variations by printing the scratchboard - like images over rolled color blends and flats. The color luminated from within. By placing these prints panoramically, I attempted to create the feeling of sound and movement through the notion of repetition.

The task of printmaking is not merely a technical achievement, but one that calls upon other virtues as well. It requires planning, patience and a cool head under pressure or when problems occur. It is not suited to just anybody's temperment. What is interesting about the media is that even with all the great technical advancements, it is the artist, who in his or her desire to express an image has stumbled onto or developed something that has added to the richness of the medium. A strong print illustrates the artist's intuition and ability to recognize and exploit the possibilities inherent within the chosen print medium. Almost all the prints that really move me posses this quality.

VI. The Seeing Eye

In archeology you almost never find what you set out to find...

Mary Leaky

Are these images really about horses? Or are they just characters in a dialogue I've written about life and the human condition? I'm interested in pushing reality so that it becomes unreal, sometimes dreamlike, other times nightmarish. It must be the theater of the absurd, as in life itself.

I use images of animals as metaphors. For me, they convey the plight of the individual and/or the terrors of individual survival. The animals are usually in hostile confrontation within a landscape that is often both threatening and idyllic at the same time. Sometimes the environment appears to be an ironic counterpart to the main action in the narrative as in "Starry, Starry Night"[Plate #1]. At other times, the serenity of the grazing horses is in direct contrast to the barren, almost surreal pastoral setting. [Plate #2] Other works depict the felt anticipation of unknown predators as in "Night Moves" or "Night Watch"[Plate #3 and #4] where the theme addresses the

fragility of life and perhaps the destructive impulses capable in all of us. As in "Raiders" [Plate #5], the intense theatrical lighting suggests the presence of yet another real predator, possibly man himself?

In the series "Legs"[Plate #6 and #7], the imagery suggests movement, sound and repetition. I am a runner. When I'm running over a long stretch of time, all alienation of mind and body fade and instinct unwittingly prevails in the form of movement. I think I hear the rhythm of hoofbeats pounding in my head and chest. It's as if I've somehow been transported to an earlier place in history and time. I think my appreciation for the aesthetics of running subliminally connected me with the sound, rhythm and movement of running horses.

The notion of repetition itself became a metaphor for choreographer Yvonne Rainer. Some comments that, "Repetition does enlarge or increase or exaggerate an idea or purpose in a statement. If something is complex, repetition gives people more time to take it in."⁸ Repetition helps to create drama.

The more absorbed I became in theme and narrative, the more I became aware of the influence of the print medium

over the sculpture and vice-versa. My choice of fence posts in the sculptures directly effected how I created the horse figures in the prints - the pointed ends of the posts became heads, and the tree limb forms were transformed into tripod-like legs. At some point, it occurred to me that these images were not totally contrived in my imagination but reminiscent of young looking foals or perhaps even the predacessor of our contemporary horse.

I soon became aware that the choices of materials and the tools had a direct influence also on the shape and forms of the imagery I created. During a critique, my thesis advisor Judd Williams commented that early man had similar kinds of experiences. He called it a "techno-morphic phenomena". He used the evolution of the container as an example explaining how early basketry making may have influenced the coil method of building clay pottery vessels. Whether or not I experienced a similar phenomena is speculative at best. But, more importantly, as an artist I think it is conceptual discovery that counts the most.

VII. Persistence of Vision

If I've learned anything about art over the past few years, it is the importance of "Persistence of Vision". A vision that has become more persistently related to who I am and the life forces within and surrounding me. I was used to accepting easy solutions to complicated problems. I was distracted by those dissenting voices clashing about in my head. After all, I wasn't trained to think, it just happened.

I discovered 'imaging' to be a better way of communicating my chaotic inner vision to the outer world. It's the source of my creativity; it is my mind's eye. Images that flash in and out of my consciousness. They are with me wherever I go. They appear in my dreams. No matter where I am, they follow me - make me deal with them. They haunt me. My best work emerges when I confront them.

I am a serious person who doesn't always take herself too seriously. In my mind, I also invent Truisms. They are personal philosophies about life that help me to understand the nature of things. They help me to see the humor in the art of everyday experience. On occasion, they

allow me to view the world from another perspective or to transcend my vision. If I've learned anything about life, I've learned that truth is a worthwhile pursuit also.

Creating the thesis worked has helped me value the willingness to work backward in the hope of gaining new insights. "Recueillir pour sauter" in French means to recoil in order to leap. This expression was enlightening for many reasons. On a personal level, I learned to value the importance of touch, sensation, and immediate experience as opposed to lengthy analysis and interpretation. This idea opened my eyes and emotions to natural forms, spaces and phenomena. Artistically, my work stretched when I began to reevaluate the need to identify with them. As artist Hans Hoffman says it so succinctly, "...nature is not limited to the objects we see - but that everything in nature offers the possibility of creative transformation, depending of course on the sensibility of the artist."⁹

Footnotes

- ¹Downs, Robert B., Books That Changed the World (New York, Toronto: The New American Library, 1956), p.94.
- ²Jackson Pollock, quoted by Lee Krasner, interviewed by Bruce Glaser, Arts Magazine (April 1967), p.38.
- ³Preble, Duane. Man Creates Art Creates Man. (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1973) p. 113.
- ⁴Okakura, Kakuzo. The Book of Tea (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964), p. 47, 48.
- ⁵Sonnier, Keith. Art in America (February 1985), p. 134 - 159.
- ⁶Memel Fote, Harris. The Perception of Beauty in Negro-African Art. (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1968), p. 51, 52.
- ⁷Carroll, Lewis. Through the Looking Glass and Alice's Adventure in Wonderland. (New York: St. Martin, 1977), p. 34.
- ⁸Lippard, Lucy R. Overlay. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 162.
- ⁹Kuh, Katharine. The Artist's Voice. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 122.



Plate
#1



Plate
#2

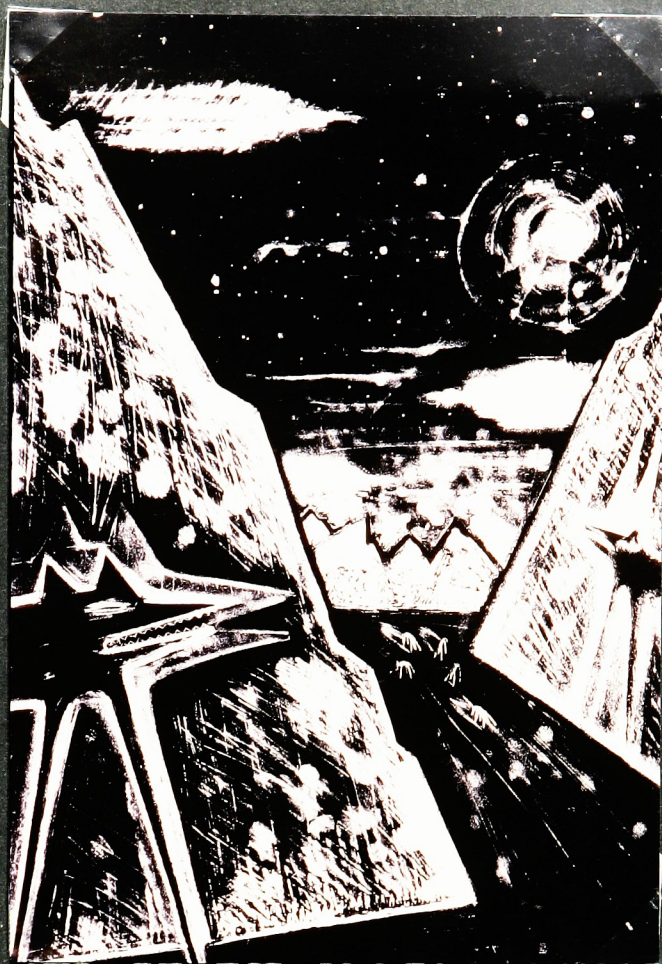


Plate
#3



Plate
#4

Plate
#5



Plate
#6

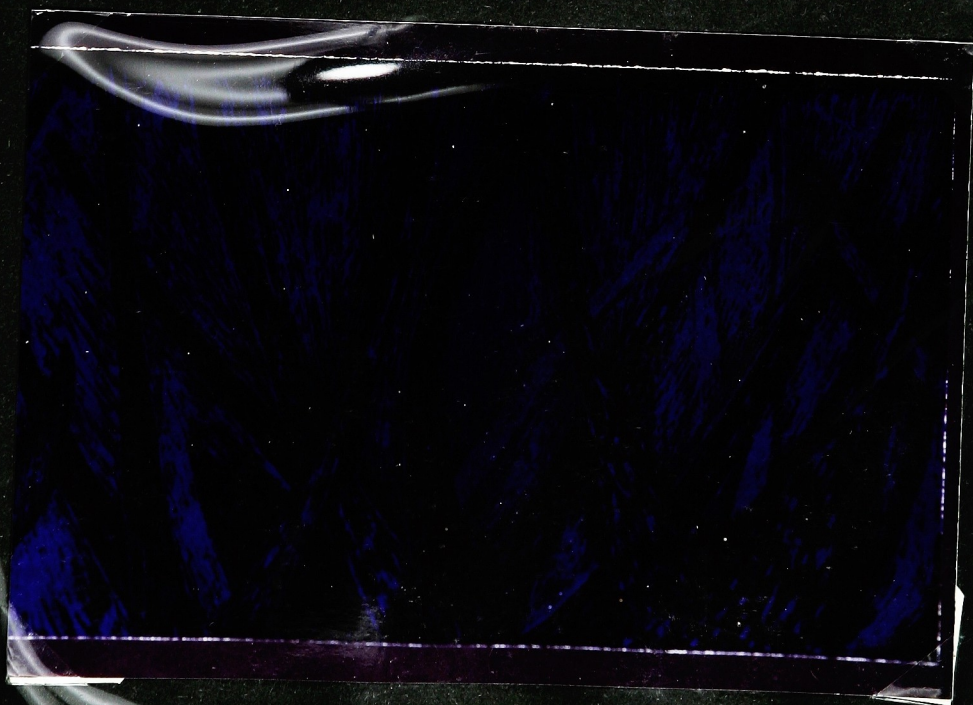


Plate
#7



Plate
#8

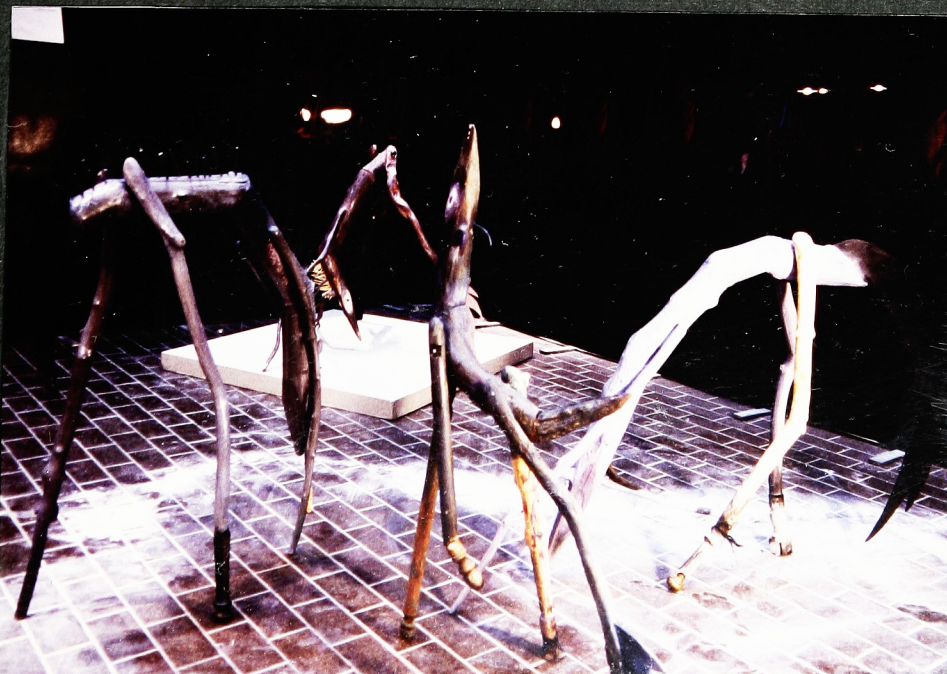


Plate
#9

Footnotes

- ¹Downs, Robert B., Books That Changed the World (New York, Toronto: The New American Library, 1956), p.94.
- ²Jackson Pollock, quoted by Lee Krasner, interviewed by Bruce Glaser, Arts Magazine (April 1967), p.38.
- ³Preble, Duane. Man Creates Art Creates Man. (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1973) p. 113.
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